

# ROADS, WATER, AND WILDLIFE

The San Juan National Forest Dolores Ranger District is a working forest, which has historically been used for many purposes. Over the years, travel routes were created across the Forest for access to timber sales, well pads, fences, and fire fighting operations. Routes, which were not constructed as system roads, were always meant to be temporary access routes, but earlier agency policies allowed the public to drive on them. This encouraged people to drive off the maintained road system, especially in areas of flat to rolling terrain.

The result of this unmanaged situation has been the creation of a spider-web of hundreds of miles of motorized tracks leading in every direction. These routes, which are not maintained, cut through meadows, streams, and forests. The result is detrimental to the water and wildlife resources of the National Forest.



## **How do all of these unmaintained routes degrade water resources?**

One of the joys of visiting the National Forest is the crystal clear water of its lakes, rivers and streams. Healthy forest floors are covered with protective vegetation. This keeps soil from eroding into streams and waterways. Continued motorized use kills vegetation and creates bare ground that erodes away, silting up waterways, degrading fish habitat and lowering water quality. Streamside vegetation is especially delicate. Tire tracks through wet meadows or streams can be almost impossible to rehabilitate. This means these routes continue to erode and impact water quality even when no one is driving on them.

Roads and trails alter the land's natural ability to capture, store and transport water. For this reason they must be carefully designed, constructed and maintained in order not to damage the water quality in our forests. This road system is constructed and maintained so that it offers motorized access to the National Forest and protects both the roadbed and water quality. Driving off of the maintained road system creates ruts, mud holes, and bogs that erode soil and degrade water quality.

## **How do all of these unmaintained routes degrade wildlife habitat?**

Deer and elk need large natural areas to thrive. Forests that allow animals to distance themselves from noise and disturbance provide secure areas for wildlife to forage, breed and raise young. This means more animals are found in areas with substantial space between motorized routes.



**Studies have documented** that fewer elk are found in areas bisected by several motorized routes. This is especially true during hunting seasons. During this time motorized routes, which may receive little or no traffic at other times of year, are often used heavily on a daily basis. Biologists have found that herds will leave National Forest lands in these areas during hunting season to escape motorized pressure.

**Other types of wildlife** also benefit from space between roads and trails. Forests provide food, cover and housing for a variety of small mammals and birds. Large predators like bears and mountain lions also need places that are not frequented by humans to raise their young, and find abundant prey.



**The goal is to identify and maintain an open road system for motorized access, while eliminating driving on some off-road routes to improve water and wildlife resources and provide for the activities residents and tourists currently enjoy.**

